

Tests You Can't Live Without Preventive Screenings for All Ages*

Physical Exam

Every 2-3 years for ages 20-49, 1-2 years ages 50 plus

A routine physical exam from a health care provider is a way to find out about the state of your health. It allows you to ask your provider questions and maybe find a health problem you do not know about. The basic parts of a check-up are: 1) a complete medical history (including family health history and previous illnesses); 2) a check on how well body organs are functioning; 3) checking the vital signs; 4) actual body examination; 5) routine diagnostic tests; and 6) a check of specific health concerns.

Blood Pressure

Every 1-2 years for ages 20 plus

Checks two kinds of pressure within the blood vessels. The higher number (systolic) gauges the pressure when your heart is pumping. The lower number (diastolic) gauges the pressure between heartbeats. High blood pressure is a symptomless disease that can lead to a heart attack and/or a stroke. Patients with a normal blood pressure reading should have blood pressure measured yearly if any of the following pertains: diastolic blood pressure between 85-89 mm Hg; African-American heritage; moderate or extreme obesity; 1st degree relative with hypertension; or a personal history of hypertension.

Professional Breast Exam

Women, every 2-3 years ages 20-39, yearly ages 40 plus

This exam is performed by a health professional to examine the breasts for signs of abnormalities.

Self Breast Exam

Women, monthly for ages 20 plus

Ask your doctor for instructions on performing a self-breast exam or call the American Cancer Society at 1-800-ACS-2345 for a step-by-step self-examination guide.

Cholesterol Blood Test

Every 3-5 years for ages 20 plus

A cholesterol test checks the levels of fatty deposits (cholesterol) in the blood. High cholesterol levels are linked to heart disease. The National Cholesterol Education Program recommends a blood cholesterol test at least once every 5 years and that high-density lipoprotein (HDL) be part of the initial cholesterol screening.

Diabetes Screening

Every 3-5 years for ages 45 and up

This consists of a blood glucose measurement that identifies high levels of glucose present in diabetics. Diabetes screening should be done every 3 years starting at age 45. Testing should be considered at an earlier age for those with a 1st degree relative with diabetes; American Indian, Hispanic, or African-American heritage; and those 20% over ideal body weight.

Regular Dental Cleaning

Every 6 months for all ages

Checks for and removes plaque build-up on your teeth to prevent further decay.

Digital Rectal Exam

Every year for ages 40 and up

This exam checks for early signs of colorectal and/or prostate abnormalities including cancer.

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Glaucoma Screening

Every 2-3 years for ages 50 plus

This exam checks for increased pressure within the eye. Glaucoma can result in blindness if not treated. Glaucoma screening is recommended to start at the age of 20 for African Americans.

Mammogram

Women, every 1-2 years for ages 40 plus

A mammography is an x-ray to detect breast tumors or problems. Women at higher risk for breast cancer should seek expert medical advice about whether to have mammograms before age 40. Note: the American Cancer Society recommends a yearly mammogram for all women over the age of 40.

Pap Test

Women, every 2-3 years for all women over the age of 20

A pap test checks for early signs of cervical cancer, uterine cancer, and genital herpes. Pap tests should start at age 18 or under age 18 if sexual activity has begun. Note: the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists recommends an annual pap test.

Prostate Specific Antigen (PSA)

Men, every 2-3 years ages 20-39, yearly ages 40 plus

A PSA checks for elevated prostate tumor markers in the blood. Prostate cancer is the most frequently diagnosed cancer and the leading cause of cancer death in men in the United States. Annual PSA testing should begin at age 40 for African American men and men with a family history of prostate cancer.

Sigmoidoscopy

Every 3-5 years ages 50 plus

A sigmoidoscopy is an exam performed with a scope that checks for abnormal lesions in the upper colon.

Skin Examination

Every 2-3 years for ages 20-39, every year for ages 40 plus

This examination performed by a health professional, checks visually for any atypical moles, skin spots, or skin problems.

Stool Blood Test

Every year ages 50 plus

This exam checks for early signs of colorectal abnormalities, including cancer.

Professional Testicular Exam

Men, every 2-3 years ages 20-39, yearly ages 40 plus

This exam checks for abnormalities of the testes in men. Testicular cancer accounts for only about 1% of all cancers in men. However, it is most common in white men aged 20-40 years.

Vision Exam

Every 3-5 years ages 20-49, every 2-3 years ages 50 and up

A vision exam checks for marked changes or degeneration of eye functioning.

*Recommendations for preventive exams may differ among various health authorities. These apply only to healthy people who do not have symptoms of illnesses. Follow your doctor's advice. Also, check with your insurance plan to see if and when tests are covered.

Source: The Clinician's Handbook of Preventive Services, 2nd edition, U.S. Public Health Service.